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# SOUTHEAST ASIAN AFFAIRS 2023

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# **SOUTHEAST ASIAN AFFAIRS 2023**

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# Introduction

Daljit Singh, Hoang Thi Ha and Khairulanwar Zaini

In 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic that had plagued Southeast Asia and the world at large for the previous two years finally receded. But hopes for a strong rebound from the pandemic were soon overshadowed by new uncertainties and upheavals in domestic and international politics as well as structural economic shifts that have been accelerated by the pandemic. There were also significant economic and geopolitical disruptions brought on by Russia's war against Ukraine, while the rising tensions between the United States and China across multiple domains have contributed to a more fraught security environment—testing the region's resilience to avoid being drawn into a conflict between the major powers.

Elections in Malaysia, the Philippines and Timor-Leste brought back familiar names and faces into power. Anwar Ibrahim finally laid claim to the Malaysian premiership that had for so long eluded his grasp. In Manila, another Marcos once again occupies the Malacañang Palace—this time it is Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the scion of the eponymous dictator who was deposed by the People Power Revolution almost four decades ago. In Timor-Leste, the one-time president José Ramos-Horta was elected back into the same office with the support of the country's founding father and revolutionary hero José Xanana Gusmão.

Meanwhile, the prospects of impending elections in Thailand and Indonesia have prompted considerable political jostling and tussling. The electoral systems in both countries feature byzantine rules for qualification and complex balloting processes so politicians and parties have to manoeuvre early to ensure they remain ahead of their rivals. Cambodia will also hold legislative polls in 2023, but the political situation appears relatively secure for the ruling Cambodian People's

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Party (CPP). The CPP intends to use the election as an opportunity for leadership succession, with prime minister Hun Sen grooming his son to eventually take over.

There was some flux in Laos and Vietnam, especially towards the end of 2022. On the last day of the year, Lao prime minister Phankham Viphavanh tendered his surprise resignation—ostensibly for health reasons—though the general view was that his failure to effectively steward the pandemic-battered economy meant that he had to go. The anti-corruption campaign in Vietnam was still going strong and claimed even more scalps, including two deputy prime ministers in December. Meanwhile, Myanmar remained in convulsion, with both the Tatmadaw and the anti-junta movement locked in a stalemate of ever-escalating violence.

### **Economic Relief and Recovery after the Pandemic**

The big relief for Southeast Asia in 2022 was the progressive end of the lockdowns that had been imposed in the previous two years to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. By the end of the year, thanks to high vaccination rates and lower virulence of the new strains of the virus, all Southeast Asian countries had transitioned to living with COVID and opened up their borders. This, together with the opening up of the region's major economic partners, led to a significantly improved economic performance, especially in terms of exports, investments and domestic consumption.

With the lifting of travel restrictions, tourism started to rebound—albeit not in big waves because of China's insistence on its zero-COVID policy throughout almost all of 2022. By the third quarter of 2022, international tourist arrivals to Singapore had recovered to almost sixty per cent of pre-pandemic levels, Thailand welcomed over seven million arrivals, and over half a million foreign tourists visited Indonesia each month. The International Monetary Fund projected economic growth of 5.3 per cent for Southeast Asia in 2022, up from 3.3 per cent in 2021. Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines led the region in terms of growth rates in 2022 at over 7 per cent, followed by Indonesia at around 5–6 per cent.

However, regional economic recovery still faced serious challenges, notably supply chain disruptions, geopolitical tensions, slow growth in China, fiscal constraints and increased poverty. Energy and food price spikes as a result of the war in Ukraine and monetary tightening in the United States have added to inflationary pressures and economic hardships across the region. In the Philippines, the hunger incidence rate—standing at 11 per cent in 2022—remained higher than pre-pandemic levels. In Myanmar, the economic situation was made worse because of internal conflict and international isolation, with 40 per cent of the population living below the national poverty line in 2022 (compared to 24.8 per



cent in 2017). In Laos, inflationary forces have aggravated its financial woes and the country is on the verge of a debt crisis, with its total debt—the bulk of which is external—accounting for almost ninety per cent of GDP. Malaysia’s strong GDP growth did not equate to higher levels of economic security because of the elevated cost of living, driven by increases in food prices, transportation costs and rents. In Singapore, housing affordability became an acute concern in light of the hikes in interest rates and property prices.

Southeast Asian economies must also contend with the “long-term scarring” as a result of the pandemic, as Jayant Menon notes (p. 30). The pandemic has induced certain “structural shifts”, including the push towards the digital economy, which can cause further labour market dislocations and inequalities both within and among countries. For Menon, the impacts of these developments “can last a lot longer and may appear less tangible but will play a critical role in shaping the future trajectory of economic growth and social welfare” (pp. 23–24). He argues that the region needs to look into enhancing labour mobility, “however difficult and politically sensitive it may be” (p. 28).

In Indonesia, the labour movement—rejuvenated after the fall of Suharto—has served as a conduit to promote labour rights, including health insurance and wage increases. Maxwell Lane states that thousands of unions, along with several union confederations and federations, have been established across the country. Yet, Lane argues that the labour movement remains an “impotent force” in Indonesian politics (p. 124), as evinced by “its inability to block the passing of the Job Creation Law” (p. 128)—an omnibus bill that substantially weakened worker protections. Although the Indonesian constitutional court ruled against the constitutionality of the legislation in November 2021, President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) was able to secure its implementation by issuing a Government Regulation in Lieu of Law (Peraturan Pemerintah Pengganti Undang-undang, or “Perpu”) in December 2022. According to Lane, the Perpu “elicited different responses from among the trade unions and civil society” (p. 128), starkly exposing the divisions between the various unions. Lane also notes that the politics of the newly formed Partai Buruh (Workers’ Party) has further divided the labour movement.

In Brunei, high energy prices offered a “short-term” boon, narrowing the country’s fiscal deficit and providing some fiscal legroom for government spending, as Ly Slesman and Chang-Yau Hoon report (p. 56). However, Brunei has maintained its efforts to diversify the economy beyond its traditional reliance on hydrocarbons, which accounted for “more than half of the country’s GDP ... and 84 per cent of [its] total revenue in 2021” (p. 54). Sectors of promising growth prospects include petrochemical products such as methanol and fertilizers, agriculture, aquaculture, ICT

and service sectors. Timor-Leste also confronts the same problem as the country's heavy reliance on the oil and gas sector puts its long-term fiscal sustainability at risk. As Geoffrey Gunn observes, Timor-Leste's sovereign wealth fund—the Petroleum Fund—is facing a “fiscal cliff” (p. 346) because of “meagre investment return[s]” (p. 345) and excessive withdrawals to fund government expenditures. Likewise, Nick Freeman has noted how Laos's growth model, which relies on natural resources, has become “increasingly unsustainable” (p. 151), though the recently opened Lao–China high-speed railway has “the potential to assist Lao individuals and companies”, especially if Vientiane can improve “last-mile connections between local businesses and railway hubs” (p. 153). Nonetheless, Freeman warns that the railway has also “compounded” Laos's external debt exposure since the government has pledged to “underwrite thirty per cent” of the railway's US\$6 billion cost and freight traffic remains “modest” (p. 152).

Other Southeast Asian countries are also seeking to diversify their sources of income and invest in new drivers of growth, including the digital economy, healthcare and wellness. Singapore is a favourite destination of vaccine manufacturing plants, including Sanofi, BioNTech and Hilleman Laboratories. Vietnamese and Thai firms are seeking to upgrade their participation in the global value chains, especially in the electric vehicles (EV) industry. Vingroup, Vietnam's biggest private corporation, has invested hefty sums of money in building EV supply chains, including battery plants and charging stations. EV production is also a critical part of Thailand's 4.0 industrial transformation. Tax and subsidy incentives by the Thai government have attracted EV giants such as Mercedes-Benz, BYD and Tesla to set up plants in the country. Thailand has also made efforts to bolster its indigenous technology development. According to Bank Ngamarunchot and Veerayooth Kanchoochar, there has been an impressive surge in R&D expenditure, and firms have been more active in innovation. The 2022 Global Innovation Index ranks Thailand 43rd among 132 economies and 5th among 34 upper-middle-income economies. The challenges for Thailand in this respect include the continued reliance on imported technologies for high-tech exports, the gap between large and small firms in embracing technology, and market concentration, which calls for fairer competition.

### **Triumphant Political Comebacks in Malaysia, the Philippines and Timor-Leste**

Elections in 2022 in Malaysia, the Philippines and Timor-Leste saw the comeback of some political personalities and dynasties. In Malaysia, the perennial prime

minister in waiting, Anwar Ibrahim, finally ascended to the top post after his ignominious sacking from the government in 1998 and more than two decades spent in the opposition camp. His triumph comes as Malaysian politics persists with its transition “from a one-party dominant regime towards a more competitive, consensual and extended coalition-based model”, as Francis Hutchinson describes (p. 179). But the transition has yet to bring about political stability, as demonstrated by the factionalism and manoeuvrings before the November 2022 election and the inability of any singular coalition to win a simple majority to form a government after the election. It was only after much horse-trading and the king’s intervention that Anwar was able to form a unity government between his own *Pakatan Harapan* (PH), the *Barisan Nasional* (BN) and the ascendant coalitions in the two East Malaysian states—the *Gabungan Parti Sarawak* (GPS) and the *Gabungan Rakyat Sabah*. The election also saw the bitterly divided and erstwhile dominant party of the country, the *United Malays National Organisation* (UMNO), winning only thirty seats in the federal parliament.

Race and religion played important roles in the Malaysian election campaign as shown by the significant inroads made into the rural Malay-Muslim heartland by the *Perikatan Nasional* (PN) coalition of the Islamist *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS) and the nationalist *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia* (Malaysian United Indigenous Party). Norshahril Saat and Afra Alatas characterize PN as “the new platform for the convergence of Malay nationalism and Islamism” (p. 193), which manifests in their campaigning strategy of whipping up ethnic and religious sentiments to portray PH as a threat to Muslims. Had PN succeeded in forging a majority in parliament, Malaysia would have had “an Islamist government” (p. 193).

In the Philippines, the May 2022 presidential election was the crowning moment for the political “restoration” of the Marcos clan (p. 235). Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. won the presidency with an emphatic 55.8 per cent of the vote—becoming the first presidential candidate to secure an outright majority since his father. His victory was in part made possible by the alliance with vice-presidential running-mate Sara Duterte, the daughter of outgoing president Rodrigo Duterte. Justin Keith A. Baquisal and Aries Arugay view their campaign as a “unified, well-choreographed political performance” of the Duterte and Marcos dynasties (p. 236). Though he praised Rodrigo Duterte’s populist regime on the campaign trail, Marcos Jr., as the president, deviated from his predecessor in adopting a health-based approach to the drug war, focusing his policy agenda on economic issues rather than law and order, improving relations with the United States, and appointing to key cabinet positions reform advocates, technocrats and trusted allies from his home base of Luzon. This has raised questions about whether

the “dance of the [Marcos-Duterte] dynasties” is politically viable in the long term (p. 249). Baquisal and Arugay warn that while the Marcos-Duterte alliance had thrived on their family brands, nostalgia for a “golden age” of development, and anti-liberal bravado during the campaigning, they have to deliver socio-economic progress to their voters to preserve their winning coalition going forward.

For all the controversies that erupted during his tenure, Rodrigo Duterte’s most significant legacy may arguably be his peace-building efforts in Mindanao. Maria Thamar C. Tana highlights his pivotal role in fostering significant political and economic reforms in the region and facilitating the creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), though she acknowledges that there remain “obstacles that threaten the fragile peace” and that “the peace process is not irreversible” (p. 263). She emphasizes that all stakeholders at the national, regional and community levels must be engaged and that the Marcos administration must be equally supportive and committed to the peace process to sustain the momentum towards sustainable peace in Mindanao.

In Timor-Leste, the presidential election saw the return of José Ramos-Horta, who had previously served as the country’s president between 2007 and 2012. Geoffrey C. Gunn lauds Ramos-Horta’s election as a “national victory” transcending “geography, historical divisions, and traditional bases” (p. 344). Ramos-Horta ran on a platform of poverty reduction and job creation, receiving the support of “kingmaker” Xanana Gusmão. As such, the country’s politics in the years to come will remain in the hands of the resistance generation. Upon coming to office, Ramos-Horta decided not to dissolve the parliament (despite his pledge to do so during the election campaign) so that the government of Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak can continue its work in fixing the country’s serious economic problems, including a shrinking sovereign wealth fund, lacklustre economic growth, rising food insecurity and increasing youth unemployment.

## **Running to the Races in Cambodia, Thailand and Indonesia**

Polls will be held in Cambodia in 2023, marking the end of a parliamentary term in which the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) had total control of the National Assembly. The court-ordered dissolution of the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) gave the CPP a free run in the 2018 election. This time around, however, Astrid Norén-Nilsson notes that the emergence of the Candlelight Party (CP)—previously the Sam Rainsy Party—in the 2022 commune elections (securing 22 per cent of the popular vote) may signal “the return to a duel between the CPP and a single opposition party” (p. 75). The 2023 election

is expected to facilitate the “power transfer to the next generation” of leaders, with Hun Manet, the son of current prime minister Hun Sen, designated as the “successor-in-waiting”. Norén-Nilsson further describes the “carefully managed transition” in which new members of the incoming cabinet were gradually introduced over the year (p. 72). Yet, she notes that Hun Sen is not expected to hand the reins over to his son “before the middle of the 2023–28 parliamentary term” (p. 73). In the meantime, the prime minister is concerned about constructing narratives, movies, monuments and memorials to burnish his political legacy as the man who brought peace to the country. Hun Sen’s ongoing attempt to transpose his credentials as a peace broker to the ongoing Myanmar crisis has, however, yielded little success thus far.

In contrast to the relative pre-election calm in Cambodia, there was significant political churn in Thailand and Indonesia as the two countries geared up to head to the hustings in 2023 and 2024, respectively.

Tita Sanglee describes the Thai political scene in 2022 as “chaotic” (p. 306), while adding that the coming election could be one of the country’s “most unpredictable” (p. 317). Parties in both the ruling eighteen-party conservative coalition and the seven-party pro-democracy opposition have been “locked in an undisguised battle for supremacy” in anticipation of the 7 May 2023 election, with “fast-paced party mutations and shifts in allegiance, underpinning the perception that self-interest always trumped ideology and that Thai politics was essentially about hard bargains” (p. 306). The ruling Palang Pracharat coalition witnessed much factional infighting and divisions at the leadership level. Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha indicated near the end of the year that he would run as a prime ministerial candidate of the Ruam Thai Sang Chart party instead of his original Palang Pracharat coalition. Among the key components of the opposition coalition were the Pheu Thai, headed by Paetongtarn “Ung-Ing” Shinawatra (the daughter of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra), and the Move Forward Party. Their respective aims, as Sanglee highlights, are somewhat “divergent” (p. 309). Pheu Thai ultimately seeks to bring the currently exiled Thaksin home without him having to serve a jail term, which would require some accommodation with the pro-military conservative establishment. Move Forward meanwhile advances a progressive agenda, which includes reform of the monarchy and the disruption of “old school politics” (p. 309).

In Indonesia, election ferment was already palpable in 2022, with several prominent figures testing the waters for the 2024 presidential election. These included former Jakarta governor Anies Baswedan, Central Java governor Ganjar Pranowo, West Java governor Ridwan Kamil and defence minister Prabowo

Subianto. Opinion polls towards the end of 2022 showed Pranowo in the lead. Natalie Sambhi predicts that, given the “popularity” of politicians such as president Jokowi “who have made a mark as capable technocratic managers”, the Indonesian electorate is likely to favour candidates with “solid track records” (p. 108). Sambhi further notes that whoever takes over from Jokowi—who commands a high domestic political stature and popularity rating as his two-term presidency comes to a close—“will have big shoes to fill” (p. 109). Jokowi is seen as having delivered on infrastructure projects, attracted more foreign direct investment and played a proactive role in helping to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, he made a mark on the international stage through his personal diplomacy during Indonesia’s presidency of the G20 and his role at the G20 summit held in Bali. Apart from economic hardships, Sambhi mentions other pressing challenges that Jakarta faces, including the restive provinces in Papua, the pandemic’s continuing impact on health and education, and the new criminal code that activists fear would erase the civil liberties and democratic gains achieved in the post-Suharto era.

### **Political Flux in the Marxist-Leninist States and Convulsion in Myanmar**

In Vietnam, the anti-corruption campaign was ratcheted up to unprecedented intensity in 2022, shaking the top tier of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) leadership and casting a long shadow over the country’s domestic politics in the years to come. Led by VCP general secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, who vowed that there would be no “off-limits zone”, the anti-corruption campaign in 2022 brought down two deputy prime ministers, Pham Binh Minh and Vu Duc Dam, and a score of powerful businesspeople in the private sector. However, as Alexander Vuving notes, a plethora of corruption scandals uncovered this year are “typical of systemic corruption” (p. 365), and Trong’s “blazing furnace” has done little to make corruption less systemic, especially when restrictions of civil society and control of information continued to be tightened.

In Laos, the most shocking political spectacle took place on 31 December 2022 with the resignation of Prime Minister Phankham Viphavanh. His abrupt departure from an office that he had only occupied for two years was officially attributed to health reasons, but Nick J. Freeman explains that Viphavanh’s leadership was “coming under increasing criticism” among his peers (p. 155). He was primarily faulted for “his handling of Laos’s response to the pandemic and the economic troubles that followed”—including soaring inflation, rising debts and depreciation of the Lao kip (p. 155). Prior to his resignation, there was a

reshuffle of the Lao cabinet, with the change of the central bank governor and the minister of industry and commerce, and the formation of a task force to deal with the country's financial and economic problems. Even though the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) remains firmly in power and political dissent is strictly controlled, whether the party could navigate the country through the mounting economic storm would be a critical measure of the country's political stability in the coming years.

In Myanmar, normal politics continued to be superseded by a vicious civil war between the military regime under the guise of the State Administration Council (SAC) and the anti-junta movement led by the National Unity Government (NUG). Cecile Medail, Tamas Wells and Gota Seto relate the brutalities of the conflict, arguing that there would almost certainly be no return to the framework of the 2008 constitution. They highlight tentative signs that the armed struggle against the military by the anti-junta forces was gaining some momentum in 2022, with the NUG able to "strengthen its institutional structure, in particular with regard to local administration and revenue generation" (p. 198). Still, they argue that the anti-junta movement remains a work in progress, with a warning that "internal differences and mistrust inherited from years of institutionalized dominance by the Bamar majority are yet to be overcome" (p. 212).

Amid all this political turmoil, tensions continued to rise and fighting resumed between the military and the Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine State. The AA, together with its civilian arm, the United League of Arakan, seeks to restore the sovereignty of the Arakanese people. The post-coup struggle between the SAC and the NUG has boosted the status of ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) such as the AA. However, as Jacques Leider notes, the AA and the NUG "share few other goals" beyond the strategic aim of bringing the Tatmadaw down (p. 223), which is symptomatic of the lack of a united front among the anti-junta forces. Leider also examines the implications of the AA's emergence as an important player in Myanmar's political landscape and the country's relations with neighbouring states China, India and Bangladesh.

### **Stability amidst Renewal in Singapore and Brunei**

In Singapore, a major uncertainty was removed in 2022 with the selection of finance minister Lawrence Wong as the next leader of Singapore when Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong retires. Terence Lee provides a nuanced account of how Wong "emerged as the top choice of fifteen out of nineteen cabinet ministers and political stakeholders" belonging to Singapore's "fourth generation" (4G)

leadership cohort (p. 280), while discussing the “immense challenges domestically and internationally” that the country faces beneath the surface of its success and impressive achievements (p. 282). The domestic challenges Lee draws attention to include public angst over issues like inequality, social mobility, rising costs and the affordability of housing, with Singaporeans increasingly “questioning whether the principle of meritocracy still holds or whether privilege and inequity have become entrenched” (p. 283). He particularly notes that “concerns over inequality and mobility are worsened by the ostentatiousness of high-net-worth individuals in the country” (p. 284).

Prime Minister Lee had himself expressed concern in 2018 about inequality and social mobility. As an advanced economy, Singapore has no official poverty line, but low-income poverty remains a persistent problem. As argued by Irene Ng, the “global economic trends of technological-biased development and globalization ... have combined to compress the wages of lower-skilled workers” (pp. 291–92), which was made worse by COVID-19. Ng notes that digital poverty among low-income groups, persons with disabilities and migrant workers is a serious drawback because digital resources have become necessities to cover all kinds of essential government services. She also mentions attention deficits and cognitive decline as well as time constraints among the poor, which limit their participation in various government support programmes.

Meanwhile, in Brunei, an absolute monarchy and a welfare state, there was an early cabinet reshuffle in June 2022 with the replacement of eight ministers. Nevertheless, the country continued to enjoy political stability under Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah, who, as Ly and Hoon describe, adopts “a hands-on approach in his leadership” (p. 61). The Brunei government is also making efforts to strengthen accountability and improve the delivery of government services.

### **Fastening the Seatbelts for the Age of Great Power Competition**

Southeast Asia is bracing itself for the age of great power competition. As declared in the Biden administration’s National Security Strategy (NSS) released in October 2022, “the post–Cold War era is definitively over and a competition is under way between the major powers to shape what comes next”. As Vuving argues, in this *post-post*–Cold War era, what we take for granted as “key characteristics” of the previous era—such as “the prevalence of peace, cooperation and globalization”—no longer necessarily hold (p. 372).

Tan See Seng points out two dimensions of the US-China rivalry that are of profound impact for Southeast Asia. First is the flare-up of tensions and heightened



risks of conflict over the Taiwan Strait following US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022, which was a "rude reminder to Southeast Asians of the fragility of peace and order in the Asia-Pacific" (p. 12). Against this backdrop, Singaporean prime minister Lee Hsien Loong has warned his compatriots to "get real" and be psychologically prepared for a "very troubled" external environment arising from the severely strained US-China relations and the war in Ukraine (p. 271). Second is the ongoing "technological decoupling" between the United States and China, especially in the semiconductor industry (p. 12); this could create complications for the chip exports of Southeast Asian countries and at the same time incentivize more chip manufacturers to move their production to Southeast Asia.

The US-China global contest also extends to the realm of ideas and narratives. David Arase elucidates the meaning and implications of China's new security diplomacy, dubbed the Global Security Initiative (GSI), which was launched by Chinese Communist Party general secretary Xi Jinping at the 2022 Boao Forum. Arase draws parallels between Russia's controversial notion of "indivisible security" to assert its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and China's employment of "indivisible security" to attain a similar objective in its peripheries. While in Eastern Europe the target is NATO, in East and Southeast Asia the target is the US forward military presence and its alliance system on the first island chain. With Moscow and Beijing laying claim to "hegemonic prerogatives in Europe and Asia, respectively", Arase warns how the "Sino-Russian partnership ... has forged a geopolitical axis across Eurasia" (p. 46).

Southeast Asian countries are in search of a new equilibrium in their strategic and policy response to the new era of great power competition. The default position is to continue the balancing act, but it is easier said than done because economics may eventually draw them closer to one major power over another. In the case of Brunei, Slesman and Hoon note that the sultanate maintains "a balance in its foreign relations by hedging between the two superpowers and rooting itself deeply into the structure of ASEAN" (p. 65). It remains to be seen how such a balancing will unfold given that China is now Brunei's largest source of foreign investment, second-largest trading partner and a key economic partner in the country's diversification agenda. Likewise, Freeman opines that Laos's current economic plight "might be driving the country further towards China's orbit" (p. 157). Laos is among the world's top five countries most in debt to China.

Even in Singapore, "a skilled foreign policy practitioner [at] hedging between the world's superpowers" (p. 276), Terence Lee points out that "the 4G leadership faces a more difficult task than their predecessors in adhering to this foreign policy

formula” (p. 277). Singapore holds the view that neither the United States nor China can be excluded from the region since both have legitimate interests, and Singapore’s aim is to “achieve a regional balance of power and influence among all the stakeholders” (p. 277). Terence Lee draws attention to the Singapore government’s efforts to deal with foreign disinformation campaigns given its ethnic majority’s susceptibility to China’s influence.

I Gade Wahyu Wicaksana calls for a new foreign policy approach for Indonesia, arguing that, while non-alignment worked well in the twentieth-century Cold War, it is not suited to a different kind of great power rivalry today. In this new geopolitical setting, Indonesia needs to use the heft provided by its size and strategic location to pursue a dynamic and active policy of “multi-alignment” to advance its interests (p. 141). Indonesia, Wahyu says, could learn from India—the champion of non-alignment during the Cold War—and the way that New Delhi’s foreign policy has evolved since the 1990s. India has been pursuing carefully calibrated alignments within the framework of a “multidirectional but independent foreign policy” (p. 143), including maintaining its strategic ties with Russia while simultaneously being a member of the Quad.

Vietnam is also pursuing multi-alignment in its foreign relations under the banner of multidirectional diversification. But, as pointed out by Vuving, “heightened tensions between Russia and the West and between the United States and China have rendered Vietnam’s geopolitical promiscuity ... increasingly harder to attain” (p. 366). He opines that Vietnam’s deference to Beijing and its traditional friendship with Moscow could undermine its warming relationship with Washington; the United States remains the only permanent member of the UN Security Council that is not Vietnam’s strategic partner. Vuving also highlights the dichotomy whereby Vietnam tilts towards China and Russia politically but veers more towards the West economically. As part of hedging its bets, Vietnam has also strengthened partnerships with other players, especially Japan, India, South Korea and key ASEAN countries.

Meanwhile, the Philippines under Marcos is charting a different foreign policy from that of his predecessor, who harboured anti-American sentiments and tilted heavily towards China. Under Marcos’s watch, the US-Philippines alliance was given a new lease of life through the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) and additional Philippine bases for American military access were being considered. Nevertheless, Baquisal and Arugay argue that Marcos’s foreign policy “is not tantamount to an explicitly US-reliant foreign policy” because he also emphasized the need to build a constructive relationship with China and the South China Sea dispute was not framed as the lynchpin of Philippines-China relations

(p. 245). According to Baquisal and Arugay, Marcos's foreign policy may shape better conditions for the country's strategic autonomy by straddling the country's "competing national priorities and strategic outlooks within the broader context of global great power competition" (p. 245).

As the US-China rivalry intensifies, the pursuit of strategic autonomy has become more salient and pressing for Southeast Asian countries. In particular, countries must be adept and agile at exercising their agency constructively. Cambodia's foreign policy choices in 2022 were instructive: Joanne Lin explores how Phnom Penh's condemnation of the Russian invasion and its strong support for Ukraine revealed that "Cambodia is not without agency nor is it a vassal state of China", especially since Beijing "has chosen to stay silent and abstained from UN resolutions on Russia's war in Ukraine" (p. 95). The uncertain geostrategic landscape in the years to come means that it is ever more imperative for smaller states—such as Cambodia and other Southeast Asian countries—to insist on the adherence to "international law and a rules-based international order so as to protect [their] own national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity", as Lin argues (p. 97).

